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2024 High-Level Political Forum: The SDGs Caught in Geopolitical Tensions

Seeing the visible signs of fragmentation on common issues in the UN's foremost platform for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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2024 HLPF: From poverty to partnerships

The United Nations (UN) High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development is an annual forum under the auspices of ECOSOC for the review of progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This year, the Forum convened at UN Headquarters in New York from 8-17 July 2024. Taking place under the theme *"Reinforcing the 2030 Agenda and eradicating poverty in times of multiple crises: the effective delivery of sustainable, resilient and innovative*

solutions", this year's Forum reviewed 5 SDGs: SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 16 (peaceful institutions), SDG 17 (partnerships).



While the HLPF does not tend to make global headlines in the same way that the UN General Assembly does every September, the Forum remains the UN's primary gathering for high-level representatives to draw global attention to their

national and political commitment to the 2030 Agenda, and in turn, to the multilateral system. The Forum consisted of a three-day Ministerial segment with speeches from 115 Ministers, Vice-Ministers, Permanent Representatives and others. Further, more than 250 high-level special events, Voluntary National Review (VNR) labs, side events and exhibitions took place in person and online.

SDGs: Only 17% on track

The Forum's discussion was informed by the latest update on SDG progress delivered by the Secretary-General's Report (*Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals A/79/79-E/2024/54*). The report's main finding, perhaps an unsurprisingly but sobering fact, is that only 17% of SDG targets are on track – which is actually an increase from 15% in the 2023 SDG Progress report. With only five years remaining, nearly half (48%) of SDG targets show marginal or moderate progress, and over one-third (35%) are stalled or regressing.

The report highlighted that an additional 23 million people were pushed into extreme poverty in 2022 compared to 2019, and showed 2023 as the warmest year on record with global temperatures nearing the critical 1.5 C threshold. Conversely, progress was made to expand mobile broadband coverage to 95% of the world population, up from 78% in 2015, and global unemployment reached a historic low of 5% in 2023. The opening remarks of Under Secretary-General Amina Mohammed called for global solidarity and ambition to overcome global challenges, calling the Forum and upcoming Summit of the Future a moment of great opportunity to turn things around. Embedded within the slow and stagnating progress on sustainable development is the global context in which divides between countries continue to widen due to the erosion of trust, unfulfilled commitments, and repeated violations of the UN Charter. This theme echoed out in the statements of countless Member States who feel they are unjustly saddled by debt while dealing with the brunt of economic and climate crises which they contributed to the least. These calls for reform will undoubtedly carry into the Summit of the Future proceedings this September.

Other recurrent themes raised throughout the Forum include:

- › The need for **international financial reform**, innovative financing and debt relief for developing countries.
- › The unique needs and vulnerabilities of **countries in special situations** (Small Island Developing States, Land Locked Countries, Middle Income Countries, and Least Developed Countries).
- › The dynamic **geopolitical context** and protracted conflicts (Haiti, Gaza, Sudan, South Sudan, and Ukraine amongst others).

VNRs: Between peer learning and PR show

By design, the HLPF is a forum for the review and follow-up of the SDGs. It provides a platform to Member States delivering their VNRs to shed light on their national experiences, challenges, and progress made to the international community. Considering the balance of geopolitical power, it should not be underestimated that small and medium sized States make the most of the HLPF staking action to move the needle forward on the SDGs. The HLPF typically sees VNR presentations from smaller States – this year with 36 countries including Austria, Guinea, Kenya, and Nepal. Two countries presented for the first time – South Sudan and Yemen. Conversely, there are now only three States which have never conducted a VNR since the process was established in 2016 – Haiti, Myanmar and the United States.

One critique of the VNR exercise can be seen in a lack of transparent dialogue and action. While there is space provided for questions to be asked following the presentation of the VNRs, the Forum's plenary format in which States line up to deliver statements is not necessarily conducive as a platform for interactive multistakeholder debate. In addition, while many countries rightfully aim to focus on their successes, there is less incentive to highlight what went wrong and where nations are struggling, even while this may help others to critically engage on shared challenges.

Finally, the Forum is a platform for amplifying outcomes from various UN processes, helping to build and sustain political momentum towards future milestones such as the Summit of the Future 2024, the Financing for Development Conference 2025, and the World Social Summit 2025. It is therefore only one part of the ongoing, complex mechanics of multilateralism at work.

Geopolitics at the HLPF

Since 2016, the HLPF has been the major international gathering to review the global progress with regard to the implementation of the SDGs. The Agenda 2030 remains the most important global multilateral process to which all 193 UN member States have committed themselves in 2015. As a consequence, it has become a long-standing practice that the engagement of States in this process is consensus-driven. As a result of geopolitical tensions and great power competition the UN system faces an increased level of polarization and obviously the HLPF is not an exception to that trend anymore. In its history, the Ministerial Declarations—a consensual text negotiated by all Member States with a view to reinforce multilateralism and resolve to work together towards shared goals—have always been adopted unanimously. This year Dominican Republic and Norway co-facilitated the Declaration.

On the last day of this year's HLPF a group of countries demanded an amendment to paragraph 15, stating that unilateral coercive measures (unilateral sanctions in particular by the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union) are an obstacle to the social and economic development of developing countries. It is not a particularly new trend that certain countries affected by those sanctions such as North Korea, Iran, Venezuela, Russia or Cuba raise this issue at the UN level. During the SDG Summit in September 2023 the same group of States threatened to block the political declaration due to the issue of unilateral coercive measures. However, using the HLPF and its Ministerial Declaration to break with a long-standing practice of a so far consensus-driven process shows the

level of tension in the UN system. The EU abstained from this vote on the basis of principle, citing that it promotes false narratives and called the amendment 'hostile'. The EU also saw this as an attempt of specific States to spoil the Forum's outcome. The paragraph was adopted with a majority of 105 States but provoked the abstention of 45 States.

Beside Paragraph 15, the group of G-77 plus China managed to adapt paragraph 18. Initially dealing with peace and security as key factors for successful sustainable development, the amendment made reference to peoples under colonial and foreign occupation and its negative impact on social and economic development. Israel and the United States refused that amendment calling it a politicization of the Forum.

Besides these two main sticking points, several delegations expressed disappointment in the weak language on gender equality and climate action in the Ministerial Declaration.

Conclusion

This year's HLPF has a similar message as the SDG Summit in 2023: More efforts are needed to ensure the success of the Agenda 2030. Only 17% of the SDGs are currently on track and there are only five years left. The outcome of this process will also have a massive impact on the future of the multilateral system with the UN at its center. Only if the Agenda 2030 process brings substantial improvements will trust in multilateral solutions be restored. Otherwise, the UN system could suffer from a profound legitimacy crisis. The HLPF also showed a narrowing scope for progressive language on gender, climate, and human rights in connection to sustainable development topics. This is an indicator for a trend to put longstanding agreements and progress into question pushed by States which oppose a liberal world order. The high level of abstentions on two paragraphs by delegations is evidence for geopolitical issues creeping into sustainable development matters.

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